



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
North Kesteven District Council  
for the year ended  
31 March 2007**

**The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) investigates complaints by members of the public who consider that they have been caused injustice through administrative fault by local authorities and certain other bodies. The LGO also uses the findings from investigation work to help authorities provide better public services through initiatives such as special reports, training and annual letters.**

## Annual Letter 2006/07 - Introduction

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about your authority. Where possible, we comment on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements to assist with your service improvement.

I hope that the letter will be a useful addition to other information your authority holds on how people experience or perceive your services.

Two attachments form an integral part of this letter: statistical data covering a three year period and a note to help the interpretation of the statistics.

## Complaints received

In the 12 months ending on 31 March 2007, I received 25 complaints about your Council. This is an increase of six on the previous year.

These numbers are too low to draw any meaningful conclusions.

Last year 58% of complaints about your Council were about planning matters. This year that has risen to 68%. The national average is 23.6% compared to 23% last year.

| Category of complaints      | Received in 2006/07 | Increase/decrease on 2005/06 |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| benefits                    | 0                   | -1                           |
| housing                     | 6                   | +3                           |
| other                       | 2                   | -1                           |
| planning & building control | 17                  | +5                           |

I draw no conclusions from this, especially as my investigations have not revealed any systemic problems.

## Decisions on complaints

### *Reports and local settlements*

A 'local settlement' is a complaint that is resolved by the Council taking, or agreeing to take, action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint so that the investigation can be discontinued. In 2006/07 27.7% of complaints dealt with by the three Local Government Ombudsmen (excluding premature and those outside jurisdiction) were resolved by local settlement. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

### *Decisions*

In 2006/07 I took 24 decisions, a figure which differs from the number of complaints received because of work in hand at the start and finish of the year.

Of those 24 decisions: in two I exercised discretion not to investigate, I found no evidence of maladministration in 12 and nine were 'premature' (in our view the Council had not been given adequate opportunity to investigate and resolve them for itself, so were returned to the Council to consider through its internal complaint procedure).

On the remaining complaint we agreed a local settlement. Overall I did not identify issues that gave significant concern or that were indicative of systemic problems in the way the Council administers its services.

### **Other findings**

As you are aware, we ask for comprehensive responses to our enquiries within 28 days. I am pleased to say your Council responded in 27.9 days on average. I am grateful to your Council for its cooperation in this respect.

### **Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints**

None of the complaints I investigated caused me any concern in the way your Council handles complaints. The information you publish about your complaint procedure is readily accessible and I am pleased to see it contains references and links on the web-site to the LGO.

### **Training in complaint handling**

Part of our role is to provide advice and guidance about good administrative practice. We offer training courses for all levels of local authority staff in complaints handling and investigation. The feedback from councils that have taken up the training is very positive.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand and in addition to the generic Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution), we can run open courses for groups of staff from smaller authorities and also customise courses to meet your Council's specific requirements.

All courses are presented by an experienced investigator so participants benefit from their knowledge and expertise of complaint handling.

I have enclosed some information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings.

### **Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman**

Generally the liaison arrangements work well, as illustrated by the average response times. Your liaison staff have been helpful and responsive to our requests for information. This level of service continues throughout the duration of our investigations, and is not confined solely to our formal enquiries. Thank you for your support and cooperation.

### **LGO developments**

You may be interested in the development of our initiative to improve the first contact that people have with us. A new Access and Advice Service will provide a gateway to our services for all complainants and enquirers. It will encourage telephone contact but will also deal with email, text and letter correspondence. We will let you have further details about how it will operate and the expected timescales and discuss with you the implications for the Council.

I hope you have received our latest special report about telecommunications masts. It draws on our experience of dealing with complaints about planning applications for masts which can be highly controversial. We recommend simple measures that councils can adopt to minimise the chances of maladministration occurring.

In July we will be publishing a special report about the difficulties that can be encountered with complaints when local authorities deliver services or discharge their functions through partnerships. *Local partnerships and citizen redress* provides advice and guidance on how these problems can be overcome by good governance arrangements that include an effective complaints protocol.

## **Conclusions and general observations**

I welcome this opportunity to comment on our experience of complaints about the Council over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

**Anne Seex**  
**Local Government Ombudsman**  
**Beverley House**  
**17 Shipton Road**  
**York**  
**YO30 5FZ**

**June 2007**

Encs: Statistical data  
Note on interpretation of statistics  
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)

| <b>Complaints received by subject area</b> | <b>Benefits</b> | <b>Housing</b> | <b>Other</b> | <b>Planning &amp; building control</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|--|-----------------|----------------|--------------|--|--------------|
| <b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>             | 0               | 6              | 2            | 17                                     | <b>25</b>    |
| <b>2005 / 2006</b>                         | 1               | 3              | 3            | 12                                     | <b>19</b>    |
| <b>2004 / 2005</b>                         | 1               | 2              | 7            | 8                                      | <b>18</b>    |

**Note:** these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

| <b>Decisions</b>               | <b>MI reps</b> | <b>LS</b> | <b>M reps</b> | <b>NM reps</b> | <b>No mal</b> | <b>Omb disc</b> | <b>Outside jurisdiction</b> | <b>Premature complaints</b> | <b>Total excl premature</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|--------------------------------|----------------|-----------|---------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|
| <b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b> | 0              | 1         | 0             | 0              | 12            | 2               | 0                           | 9                           | 15                          | <b>24</b>    |
| <b>2005 / 2006</b>             | 1              | 2         | 0             | 0              | 3             | 7               | 0                           | 4                           | 13                          | <b>17</b>    |
| <b>2004 / 2005</b>             | 0              | 1         | 0             | 0              | 1             | 4               | 1                           | 6                           | 7                           | <b>13</b>    |

See attached notes for an explanation of the headings in this table.

| <b>Response times</b>          | <b>FIRST ENQUIRIES</b>        |                                   |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
|                                | <b>No. of First Enquiries</b> | <b>Avg no. of days to respond</b> |
| <b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b> | 12                            | 27.9                              |
| <b>2005 / 2006</b>             | 7                             | 40.7                              |
| <b>2004 / 2005</b>             | 2                             | 43.5                              |

**Average local authority response times 01/04/2006 to 31/03/2007**

| <b>Types of authority</b> | <b>&lt;= 28 days %</b> | <b>29 - 35 days %</b> | <b>&gt;= 36 days %</b> |
|---------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| District Councils         | 48.9                   | 23.4                  | 27.7                   |
| Unitary Authorities       | 30.4                   | 37.0                  | 32.6                   |
| Metropolitan Authorities  | 38.9                   | 41.7                  | 19.4                   |
| County Councils           | 47.1                   | 32.3                  | 20.6                   |
| London Boroughs           | 39.4                   | 33.3                  | 27.3                   |
| National Park Authorities | 66.7                   | 33.3                  | 0.0                    |